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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Mary E. Clarke, Ankeny, Iowa
Mike Hicklin
Iowa Department for the Blind, Des Moines, Iowa
10-2-2010, 10:25 AM**

Mike Hicklin: Mary and I have been friends and co-workers for many years. Both are retired from the Department. This interview is part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's

History of blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Mary, do we have your consent to record this interview?

Mary Clarke: Yes, you do.

Hicklin: We'll be talking about the experiences with blindness beginning in the early '50s.

Clarke: That's right. I guess my experiences with blindness has to start back in Nebraska; since I graduated from country school in 1957. It was a one-room schoolhouse and half of the school were my family members. It was, at that time as I was graduating from 8th grade, that I started having problems with my vision; noticing that when there was a bright light on the chalkboard I couldn't see what was on the chalkboard, things like that. My mother took me to an optometrist, I had glasses and nothing more was said. If I couldn't see something outside, my mother would say, "If you would only take time to look." So I thought, "Well, this has to be in my head. This whole problem has to be in my head." In those days, any disability that you had you more or less tended to keep private, because you didn't know how people were going to react to it. You kind of expected people to react negatively to it, so it was pretty much kept private.

I had two advantages though, my parents were married during the Depression and so they instilled in us, you do the best with what you had. The other thing was I grew up in a large family, and so we all had to pitch in and work together in order to survive. So I say those two things were to my advantage because nobody gave me any special treatment.

When I went on to high school and went to...and that was in 1957, I entered the convent. It was called "The Aspirency," girls that entered in their freshman year of high school. All through high school I just did the best I could with the vision I had. It was very tedious, but I pretty much stayed on the honor roll. In fact, I did stay on the honor roll all four years. Whenever I was asked to read in class, I would just freeze up because I knew it was very slow and very tedious. I didn't want anybody to know that I was having this problem.

I would volunteer when we would have eye examinations at the school. I would volunteer to help out with the examinations and so by the time I went through all the examinations with the other students I had it memorized, so when it came my turn to get up there, I just rattled off the letters I needed to rattle off and got by that way.

Then later on, when I graduated from high school in '61 and went on into the main convent experience. It was in, oh, it was about '66 or '67 I was supposed to light the candles before Mass in the Chapel and all the nuns were there ready for Mass to start and all looking on. These candles were like four feet tall and I was trying to light them with this lighter that was on a pole and I couldn't see the top of the candle so ultimately I pulled down three candles before the nun called me into the Sacristy and said, "What's wrong with you?" Then I had to tell her, "I can't see the top of those candles." At that point they sent me on to Omaha to check to see what was wrong, and went to an ophthalmologist who said I had optic atrophy. That's kind of a catch all for "don't know exactly what's wrong, so we'll put it under the category of optic atrophy.

This particular convent was a Missionary Order; it was a Missionary Benedictine Order. They had hospitals and schools in Nebraska, but most of their activities were in Africa, Spain, Portugal, South America, Korea. They had a policy that if you had a disability you could not be in the Order, because they figured if you had a disability you would not be able to go on into the Mission. But since I lost my vision while I was in the convent, they decided that they would make an exception for me, but with that exception was that I would do the cleaning and the cooking and the laundry so that others could go to the Missions. It was a decision that was made by the Head Mistress, and because we took the vow of obedience, you were expected to just follow through with that. I had one year before I needed to take final vows, which would have been for life. When I came to that point, I decided there's more that I want from life than this. And so, I decided to leave the Convent.

My parents were very disappointed and my mother said, "You come home and we'll decide what you do." I went to my Superior and I said, "I can't do this, I cannot go home and have somebody else telling me again what to do." They were very good. They helped me get settled in Omaha. They helped me get my first apartment and my first job, which was in a nursing home, where I made minimum wage, which was \$1.50 an hour. Then I wrote my parents and I said, "I'm out and I'm in Omaha." Keeping in mind that I left home when I was 13 and I left the convent when I was 26. There was a lot of catching up I needed to do as far as adjusting to society.

I worked at the nursing home and eventually applied for a job at Immanuel Medical Center in their Rehabilitation Department because I was thinking of going on to college.

There was a new program at UNO for Recreational Therapist. The program interested me so I checked with Nebraska Services for the Blind and they said that they would help me with the finances. I also continued to work nights at Immanuel in their Rehab Center to pay for my rent and my personal expenses. Then in '73 I graduated from UNO. It just happened that the Recreational Therapist at Immanuel in the Rehab Department was leaving and so I kind of walked right into that job. In fact, I worked the 3-11 shift as a Nurse's Aide and came in the next morning as the Recreational Therapist. It's kind of like being in the right place at the right time.

It was during this time that I met my husband, Duane, so in '74 we were married. The problem was he had his job in Des Moines and so I left my job in Omaha to move to Des Moines. It was very interesting because Dave Quick was the counselor in the Council Bluffs area for Iowa, and I was sitting in my office getting ready for some afternoon activities and all of a sudden here Dave Quick comes walking and introduced himself. I was amazed that the counselor from Iowa was coming already before I moved to Iowa. I had contacted them with regard to library services and stuff, but I had not done anything further than that. I found that very impressive.

When I moved to Iowa, I applied for jobs in Recreation Therapy and not having experience with standing up for myself or even any skills in blindness, I accepted the fact that they would always say to me, "We need someone who can drive." And so I thought, "Okay, that's out." Okay since I'm taking this break in my employment career, I decided to go to Drake and get my Master's Degree in Teaching. After, I think it was six months, after we were married that I

started at Drake. Within a year and a half I had my Master's Degree in Teaching and was offered a job at St. Agustin's School teaching 4th, 5th and 6th grade. I did that for five years until our daughter was born.

When Jessie was born, I just stayed home as a mom. We decided that financially we were doing well enough that I could stay home and just be mom and, which was something I really, really did enjoy. But when she was four, I lost a lot of vision again. At this point, I just felt that I could no longer be a teacher. I felt like I wouldn't be able to keep up with my students. And that is when I decided to come into the Adult Orientation Center and worked on my skills and my blindness skills. At the same time, not realizing at the time, but building my confidence and getting my direction in life. That's kind of my story.

Hicklin: What kind of techniques did you use when you were going to UNO and Drake? Were you using Braille at that time or using large print? How did you get through the course work with particularly reading being something that would be very difficult?

Clarke: When I went to UNO, I had some usable reading vision and so a lot of my reading I did on my own, but then I also had some books that were on tape. I still, at that time, did not want people to know that I couldn't see, so there were a couple of times I can laugh about these experiences now, but at the time they were very traumatic.

One was I had an ex-Marine that taught Kinesiology. Kinesiology is not an easy course. We were supposed to do a graph of some kind of exercise or experience and mine was to do a graph of design of a bowling serve. Then we

were supposed to tell which muscles were extending, which were contracting throughout the whole process. I couldn't see the video and so I just graphed as I imagined it to be and that is one course where I received a D. (Laughter) When I went to him and I said, "This isn't fair, I couldn't see the video." He said, "You could have asked someone to work with you on it." He was right. I didn't feel like I wanted people to know that I couldn't see.

The other time was when I was taking one of those one-hour courses that you take as an option course. I was supposed to referee a volleyball game and I couldn't see what the students were doing in the volleyball game. They were all screaming at me because I wasn't calling any fouls and they were not playing a nice clean game, I guess. I kind of broke down at that point and my instructor said, "What's wrong?" I said, "I can't see it." It was just very hard for me to let people know.

15:00

Clarke: I guess part of it was that I was always a very independent person. I didn't want anybody pitying me. I didn't want anybody thinking I couldn't do something that they could do. And so that whole attitude that I had I needed to change, but I couldn't see it at that time. When I went to Drake, again I had some of my books were on tape and then I had readers. I paid readers to do some of my readings. Because in one course I remember I had six books that I had to read. It was a curriculum course. I paid, through the Department; I had paid a reader to read some of my books. I would ask for extra time in my tests. I was getting a little bit wiser I guess you would say. It's interesting because I would say, people would say to me...if

I would say to them, “Well, you know I have a vision problem.” They would say, “Oh, I wouldn’t have guessed.” I’d be very proud of that...that they wouldn’t guess that I had a vision problem. (Laughter) That was the best way to go through life. I have to say that my experiences in the center were like a lifesaver for me because it started helping me put things in perspective. For one thing, I had to address my own attitude. I often say if you do not have a good positive attitude to yourself, then don’t expect other people to have a good positive attitude concerning you. It has to come from you first. Then you can convince others that, hey, this does work. What I am doing does work. So that took me time, that took me time, it took me learning my alternative skills but also being convinced in my own inter being that I was...blindness was just a characteristic in my life. It was not a controlling force in my life.

Hicklin: Thinking back to your really early years, how...can you describe how difficult it was to basically not go back home and to leave the convent and strike out on your own and make your own way. That certainly took some courage.

Clarke: (Laughter)

Hicklin: (Laughter) Leap of faith, whatever.

Clarke: I remember when I wrote my parents and told them that I was...I had left the convent; they still tried to convince me to stay. My dad had a hard time even talking to me for about a year. He was very hurt. My mother sent my sister to Omaha to kind of scout things out to see if I was doing all right. A lot of it I just had to get out there...for example, I didn’t know...I had never had a checking account, okay. So I

had to just learn how to balance my checkbook. I had to learn just how to pay my taxes and pay my apartment and stay within a budget. I think probably some of the more laughable experiences were dating. Here I was 26 years old and kind of people expected you to know a little bit about what to expect in dating. All of those kinds of things I just had to learn by...just try to use common sense and experience. Often I was very trusting of people too, because I lived in not the best neighborhood in Omaha. I worked the 11-7 or the 3-11 shift. I would walk 7 or 8 blocks at night in the neighborhood, you know, thinking I'm going to be all right. Somebody was watching over me because nothing ever really happened. I'd get home safely. (Laughter) Now when I look back, ooo, that was not the wisest thing to do.

Hicklin: When you were traveling at night like that did you have the resources a cane or how did you navigate at night?

Clarke: No, I didn't have any cane travel experiences or any experiences with travel. I would memorize my course. I would...my vision at night was not good. I would go during the day; I would walk the route so that I kind of had an idea of the course. Same thing when I went to college. I would go out a day or so ahead and I would walk the course to my classes, so I knew when the classes started I knew where my buildings were and where my rooms were and those kinds of things. I'd scout it out ahead of time. That's the way I survived in those things. I even was...I don't know if you say brave...but because I couldn't drive a car, I bought myself a three-speed Schwinn and I thought that way I could get to the grocery store and I'd go down to my brother's house. They lived in Omaha at the time. One day I was

coming back from the grocery store and I thought I was following the taillights of a car and it was the headlights and at that point I decided the bicycle is not a good thing for me either, so I sold that.

Hicklin: What prompted you to take the step of learning travel with the cane and using Braille? How did you make the step from trying to do things basically visually to using techniques like those two?

Clarke: Dr. Plumber was my Ophthalmologist in Des Moines. When Jessie was 4, that's when I knew I'd lost a considerable amount of vision. At that point I was really holding back on what I did. I would not go downtown. I didn't think it was safe for me to catch a bus. I wouldn't go downtown. I wouldn't cross any streets. I found myself being more and more of a hermit in the sense, staying closer to home. If Adam or Jessie needed a doctor appointment, I'd have Duane take off from work. So, he would either use some of his vacation time or some sick time or whatever and drive us to the doctors. I really...I started counting more on him...started giving up more of my independence. Only going places where I thought, you know where I was familiar. I would also worry if I went someplace and I didn't know the environment. I would worry that I was going to make some really stupid mistake or something like that. I started to avoid going out to places unless Duane was with me and could give me some guidance. I went to visit Dr. Plumber and he said...he told me...he said, "You know you really lost a lot of vision." I said, "I know." And he said, "I think you should get in touch with the Department for the Blind. They have a very good program." At this point I was ready to do anything because I just knew I could not go on

the way I was, depending more on other people, on Duane and losing that independence. He suggested I go to Iowa City and get a second opinion, which I did. I went to Iowa City and they ran all these tests and they said, “I think you have retinitis Pigmentosa.” And I said to them in Iowa City, “Well what do you think about me going to the Department and learning some alternative skills?” There answer was, “I guess it wouldn’t hurt.” (Laughter) And so at that point I called Ed Sheppard and I said, “Ed, I said...” He had earlier on, he had suggested that I go through the program and I had turned him down because I didn’t think I needed it. In fact, when I first came to Iowa, I sat down with Ken Gerridikin and he said, “Well, did they teach you cane travel in Nebraska?” I said, “No, I don’t need it.” He said, “Did they teach you Braille in Nebraska?” I said, “No, I can see well enough.” And he said, “I guess there’s nothing more we can do for you.” But that was my attitude. It took me really kind of hitting rock bottom for me to finally decide okay, this is...I’m not going to get anywhere with what I have now. So I called Ed Sheppard and he...by that time he was a Supervisor, he was no longer my Counselor, so Frank Strong...he told me about Frank Strong. Frank Strong was my Counselor. Right away I wanted to get into the Orientation Center. I didn’t want to waste any time. They were just getting ready to take their break for the summer and they had a pretty full student count at the time. I had to wait a couple of months. I started learning my Braille at home. Um...he’s retired (Chuckle)...anyway; my Braille teacher brought me a book at home and...

Hicklin: That’s Terry Pulpert?

Clarke: Yes. Terry Pulpert brought me a Braille book and he also brought me a cane. He showed me a little bit how the Braille works. I pretty much taught myself Braille, actually, at night my husband would have the print copy and I'd put my sleep shades on and I would work on my four lessons. Always after I had Adam and Jessie off to bed, that was my time. I would prepare four lessons. When he came the next week I would have those four lessons ready for him. He'd listen to those and then the next week I'd have four lessons. By the time I came into the Orientation Center, I had pretty much taught myself Braille. Not the writing, just the reading. I didn't do much with the writing. I did more writing then as a student at the Center. As far as the cane travel, he worked with me around my neighborhood again with sleep shades on. I had walked around the neighborhood with Adam and Jessie many times, so it was very familiar territory. Then one night we were going to go grocery shopping. My husband said, "Why don't you take your cane?" I said, "Well, I don't want people looking at me." He said, "Oh, nobody is going to know you at the grocery store." "Well, okay." We get to the store and no sooner walk in the store and there's two little bratty kids running up and down the aisles. Come around the corner and said, "There's a blind lady." I turned to Duane and I said, "See?" Went around the next corner and, "There she is again." I gave him a bad time because I said; "I told you this is what was going to happen." So I took my cane back home and of course parked it again. One day Terry came over and said, "We're going to go downtown. I'm going to work with you on crossing streets." I thought I'd die. After that I made all kinds of excuses for not doing cane travel. Of course, when I came to the Center there was no avoiding...this is

part of what I was going to do. I worked at it. Rosie Thierer was my travel teacher.

30:00

Clarke: It was very intense. Again I figured if I was going to take this time out of my life, then I was going to do it the right way. I can honestly say I never cheated in any of my classes. I figured it was kind of an investment for me, but it was also an investment for my family. I didn't want Adam and Jessie to grow up and think that they had to stay around and take care of me. That just reminds me of another story. This kind of goes back when I decided to come into the Center, I had gone home to tell...our family...was getting together. I told them that I was going to go in for training, my vision is getting worse. My one brother said, "Will you and Duane move to Nebraska and we'll build you a house. I always say, "I should have taken him up on that." (Laughter) The other thing was more emotional. My oldest sister and her husband had nine children that they raised. They pulled Duane...Duane had a swimming accident, so he's a quadriplegic. As a result of that, he's in a wheelchair and then of course, me, you know I'm blind and Rita and Leonard pulled us aside and they said, "When you and Duane can no longer take care of Adam and Jessie, we would like to raise them for you." They did it out of the goodness of their hearts. They are such generous people, but it left such a sick in the pit of my stomach thinking that I would not be capable of taking care or raising or seeing our children raised, growing up. That was a very, very much of a determination factor in me really putting my whole effort into my training at the Center. I am not going to let that happen to me. I was very serious about my training here. I

owe so much to having this opportunity to go through the training at the Orientation Center because we have a tremendous program. The other thing that...a story that came to mind when I was talking about the cane is after I left the Center; the tendency is that at the Center you have all this support. You have people supporting you all the time and saying, "You can do this, you can do this." When you leave the Center, you kind of...it's kind of like when you retire. (Laughter)

Hicklin: Yes, we're all learning about that. (Laughter)

Clarke: (Laughter) All of a sudden you think, "Oh, I don't have all these people around me supporting me." You are kind of at a loss. And so, I get this phone call from Adam's school and they are having an ice cream social and they wanted some volunteers to help with the ice cream social. Well, my first thought was to tell them, "No, I'm blind." Then I knew that they would just leave me alone. They would say, "Oh, I'm sorry I bothered you." But I thought, "No, I need to challenge myself." So I said, "Oh sure, I can come and help." So I go to the school with Adam and Jessie in tow and I remembered that women were just chattering, chattering, chattering and I walk into that room and it just went totally silent. Oh, boy. One of the ladies came up to me and said, "Can I help you?" I said, "Yeah, I'm here to help serve." She goes, "Oh!" Just silence again. I said, "Well, what needs to be done." Well, we need someone to pour the juice and coffee." I said, "Oh, I can do that." And so I did. It made me feel so good. Also, it put them at ease. They felt a whole lot more comfortable. I think a lot of dealing with people in general is putting them at ease. They don't know how to react sometimes and they just need some

direction. Anyway, it all worked out fine in the end and I was glad that I had challenged myself to do that.

Hicklin: Certainly an opportunity to educate, which is excellent.

Clarke: Yes, that is very true – that’s very true. And sometimes I think we don’t realize how much we’re educating people. We just kind of go about our lives and don’t really realize that people are watching us. I’ll be sitting, for example, in the doctor’s office and have my Braille book and I’ll be reading. It’s not uncommon for someone to come up and say, “That looks so fascinating, how does that work?” So then I talk to them about Braille and about training and just make it an educational experience.

Hicklin: What years were you in the Center?

Clarke: I entered in, let’s see, I entered in ’82, the fall of ’82 and left in ’83, in February of ’83.

Hicklin: You’ve obviously worked many years here at the Department, when did you come as an employee here? What were you doing? What all have you done here over the years?

Clarke: Well, it was in ’84; Louise was looking for someone to work in Independent Living. It was working with elderly people in the home, helping them to maintain their independence and make necessary contacts in the community. I was hired to work in Independent Living in ’84. Generally, when new staff come on board, they go through training in the Orientation Center, but since I had just

completed my training in the Orientation Center, I was pretty much ready to start my job. I did travel with some of the other staff to see how they did the job and then started on my own. I had 30 counties on the west side of the state, all the way up from Sioux City area down to the Council Bluffs area; worked with people, elderly people, in their homes. Working with them on Braille, working with them on travel or helping them to make the necessary contacts with Social Services or various needs or getting them involved with Meals on Wheels or with other retirement groups and so on. Then in '85 there was an opening in the Adult Orientation Center for a travel and sewing teacher. I applied for that position and Jim Witte hired me to be a staff person in the Orientation Center. I worked in the Orientation Center for 24 years; started off teaching cane travel half days, and sewing half days. It was kind of fun with sewing. I had several of the male students that took an interest in learning sewing. I had one student made himself a workout sweat suit and then I had one other student that...he had two daughters and he made dresses for his two daughters. I thought that was pretty neat. I liked that because when I was doing in the Center...because I had already learned my Braille ahead of time and so on, I took Industrial Arts, which was something the guys took. The guys took Industrial Arts and the girls took sewing. There was only one other female student that was taking Industrial Arts. I took it because one thing that keeps us from doing what we want to do is the fear. Whether there is a fear of not succeeding or the fear of injuring whatever or it, ourselves sometimes keeps us from doing what we want to do. Industrial Arts was something I was very much afraid of. So I made myself do that. I was happy to see that there was a lot more of this

crossover where guys were taking sewing and more women were taking shop.

39:59

(End of Recording 1)

(Beginning of Recording 2)

Clarke: I was talking about teaching sewing and travel. Eventually I went to teaching Home Ec. That was very...probably an area that I felt really, really energized in because, in that area you needed to use travel skills, you needed to use your Braille skills to accomplish what you need. It is kind of an area where you took all your experiences that you were...of classes that you were having in the Center and kind of applying it to completing something. I really, really enjoyed that. Later on, in addition to teaching Home Ec., I started teaching Braille and kind of got the Braille curriculum a little bit updated and really getting the students working. I love to read, so if I can get somebody else to get to the point where they can pick up a book and hold a book and read a book, it was just a real thrill for me. I always enjoy seeing the students themselves make their progress and start getting a handle on things, start looking at themselves a confident way, in a more positive way.

Hicklin: Thinking of reading and books, if memory serves me correct, you wrote or compiled quite an elaborate collection of recipes that were distributed. How did that all come about?

Clarke: As I was working in the Home Ec. area, I started on the computer, on the computer I started putting together the recipes that I thought were really good recipes. Many of the recipes came from students. When we started in Home Ec., I would sit down with them and say, “Don’t worry about whether you can cook something, tell me what you like.” So they would start naming off recipes. “My mother made this or my grandmother made this.” I said, “Bring a recipe.” They would, they would bring their mom’s recipes or their grandmother’s recipes or some recipe a friend of theirs had. I started keeping these recipes on my computer. It got to the point where I had a pretty good collection of recipes. So I organized it into a recipe book. We ended up publishing it. I call it the “Memories Cookbook” because those recipes for me are memories of different people. When I do one particular recipe, I remember who gave me that recipe. That’s why I named it “Memories Cookbook.”

Hicklin: Books like those cookbooks are still actively used in Home Ec., so...

Clarke: Yes (Laughter) Yes, yes.

Hicklin: They’ve been a hit over the years.

Clarke: I still hear from people saying, “Oh I’m so glad that you did that.” They have them in Braille or they have them on disc or they have them on tape. I’m glad they are being used.

Hicklin: It is certainly notable that you were famous for your world-class cinnamon rolls.

Clarke: One of my first projects that I had them make in Home Ec. was cinnamon rolls from scratch. It was a good project to start a student off because they needed to use the stovetop, they needed to use the oven, they needed to use measurements and a lot of times they would think, “Oh golly, I don’t think I could do that.” Their cinnamon rolls would come out great and they would share them with whomever. It seemed like that kind of got them over that apprehension or that hump, because from then on they were just...they were just really going. That was very good. I thought that was a good project.

Hicklin: All that certainly pleased a lot of staff, as the students would bring them around to hand out their cooking and the cinnamon rolls. They were very much appreciated. A welcome sight to see warm cinnamon rolls coming.

Clarke: In fact, when we would, new staff people that were going through the orientation training, if it was the Library, they were saying, “when are we going to get our cinnamon rolls?” Or if it was Field Op, “When are we going to get our cinnamon rolls?” It was...plus, you know, sometimes our Home Ec. areas, they would take wear and tear during the day if you have four people cooking in four kitchens and always the next morning we would come in and the Maintenance Department had those kitchens spotlessly cleaned again. So once in a while, our students would make some cinnamon rolls and make sure they got down to Maintenance for their breaks. (Chuckle)

Hicklin: And we gladly ate them, every one. (Chuckle)

Clarke: (Laughter) It was kind of our way of saying, “thank you.”

Hicklin: It was certainly very much appreciated.

Clarke: I guess when I was in Braille I also put together something so that students could move ahead with their reading and writing. I did put together some lessons on spelling, because sometimes, I notice this myself, I was always a good speller, but as I lost my vision and didn't read visually anymore, where I had that reinforcement of a visual word, I could see myself slipping with my spelling. I started questioning my own spelling. I did put together a spelling series that the students could work on, kind of independently and still be working on their Braille skills, using the spelling as part of their Braille skills. The other thing that I did was provided tapes so that they could work on their writing skills using the transcribers and tapes. As they got finished with the Braille Code, we worked on speed and accuracy. I would have timed tests for them. It was always kind of fun because they would always check back to see, last month I was able to write, or yesterday I was able to write so many words in so many minutes. Usually two errors was the most I thought they should have. They could see their improvement. So they themselves could see...it got to be a game. See if I can do better next time. They keep working. Then they would compare to each other. “I think I'm going to beat you today” or something like that. We'd get a little bit competitive there. Then I also put together some games. I took games like “Scatagories” and I put those into Braille, so that they could use those. Lot of time people like to sit down and just play some board games or whatever.

Hicklin: Certainly.

Clarke: I took like “Oodles” and “Scatagories” and “Balder Dash.” Balder Dash is one that was a lot of fun. Definitions that you would never imagine like a, um, what was it... “mushtopper” is actually an umbrella. (Laughter)

Hicklin: Sounds like an ice cream cone.

Clarke: I know. What is a “Mushtopper”? It’s an umbrella. (Chuckle) So, we did things like that.

Hicklin: Sounds like a lot of fun.

Clarke: Yes it was.

Hicklin: Can you think of any other stories that you’d like to mention?

Clarke: Oh, I’m sure there’s a lot of them, but...oh, we’d go camping sometimes and I remember especially one that we went into Nebraska and we had teepees. It was so hot and there were so many flies and so many mosquitoes. We’re bringing all our gear down to the tepees, Sandy’s going, “Oh my gosh!” And I’m going, “I’m trying to think positive. I’m trying to think positive.” (Laughter)

Hicklin: “I’m leaving now!”

Clarke: (Laughter) Lot of good experiences. It took me five years to get up on the water skis.

Hicklin: Do you have any favorite Alumni Banquet stories, since today is Alumni Banquet for 2010? Certainly there

was lots of food prep and lots of good times seeing former students.

Clarke: In the beginning, we had Alumni Banquet, I guess the Alumni Banquet or the day that I remember was when I was a student, because the students were very much involved in the preparations. At that time, we had a Tea in the afternoon and I remember that particular year, we had...it was like a rainbow and then we had all these coins at the end of the rainbow. We had these napkins and the napkins were rainbow napkins. They had a rainbow on them. By turning the napkin over I was able to make them, connect them to make a rainbow out of them on the table, on the serving table. I remember Rosie Thier, at the time said, "Oh, you and I should go into catering." (Chuckle) That was a lot of fun; all the preparation and stuff. At that time, people would bring in things too. It wasn't just the students preparing things, other than bringing in for the tea. We were very much involved in the banquet preparation themselves and would start days in advance. I guess maybe the banquet that I think sticks in mind the most is the one that I went to when I was a student. Maybe the other one would have been the year that I gave the speech at the Alumni Banquet. That was the same year where my cookbook was published and came out. I remember the speech that I gave. It was about success. When you look at success, success can take a lot of different faces. Some people look at success, I started off my speech with this, you know, by what you own or how you dress or whatever. True success comes from within. True success is being happy with life and being happy with fulfilling your goals that you set for yourself. I went on with that. Through it, I showed the importance of the Orientation Center and I

compared it to a story from “Aesop’s Fables” about a bird looking for a drink and the bird comes to a place where there is a pitcher of water and so the bird is trying to drink from this pitcher but it can’t drink because it can’t reach the water. So, it starts beating against the pitcher with its wings and trying to break the pitcher and the pitcher is too strong. Then it takes its beak and tries to break the pitcher and the pitcher is too strong so it gets discouraged. Sometimes I think when we look at blindness, starting to deal with our blindness, we kind of feel like that bird. We feel like this is overwhelming. This is something that maybe, you know, some people would consider giving up. But this bird ultimately sits and looks at it, “What are my options?” It started picking up pebbles and putting pebbles into the pitcher and eventually enough pebbles brought the water up to the level where the bird could reach in and drink. I compared that to our experiences at the Orientation Center; that it’s kind of like all kinds of experiences. We have all kinds of experiences of the classes, but we also did a lot of other things where we needed to step out of our comfort zone and challenge ourselves.

15:00

Clarke: Those I compared to the pebbles. Then my last question for the people at the banquet that day was, “Are you challenging yourself or are you still thirsty?” I did get a lot of response. Some said, “I’m still thirsty.” Then you start looking, “What can I do?” What can I do to change things?” So I guess that’s the other one that stands out for me.

Hicklin: This has been incredibly interesting. I certainly thank you for being willing to share with everyone.

Clarke: You're welcome. You just can't give up on life. Just keep challenging yourself. That's it.

Hicklin: One of the things that I have observed here over the years is that the Orientation Center is really the heartbeat of the Department. There are so many good things that have come out of the Center in the way of concepts, people. It's just in this day and age where a lot of Centers are being closed. It's such a neat thing that we still have our training center and it's still doing extremely good work and helps keep the Department in the forefront of Agencies around the country.

Clarke: I'm always just amazed, when I look back at some of the staff that have been here, some of them started working for the Department in their 20s and are now in their 60s, you think, a good portion, a very large portion of their life has been to helping provide this quality service. That's real dedication. It's really awesome, it really is. I'm proud to have been a part of this. I really, both for my own personal life and my work life, it's been great.

Hicklin: Well, thank you again very much, Mary.

Clarke: Yeah, you're welcome.

18:02

(End of Recording 2)

Deb Brix

3-5-2011